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## Elijah's "God Contest" I Kings 18:1-40

**Intro:** In **ch17**, there was a series of showdowns between the difficulties of life in the midst of a drought and the word of Yahweh. As we discovered, Yahweh's word was more than sufficient for any downturn in circumstances, up to and including even death. In **ch18**, we have another showdown, a famous showdown; one that was larger, more public and had greater spiritual significance for the Israelite population of the Northern Kingdom. The reason for this dramatic showdown is given right here in the very first verse of ch18

**1** – Israel has gone now some 3 years without any rainfall or even dew on the ground. Crops are non-existent; even grass has become scarce. All of this is devastating for an agrarian society and its bad press for Baal and his alleged power of fertility. Now we read the Yahweh, the only real fertility God, has determined to send rain again. But, He can't just send rain; no, that just won't do.

For 3 yrs now the people of Israel have realized that Baal's had a massive case of impotence. If Yahweh sent rain again, they would have just said that Baal had recovered, that he had been rejuvenated. So, before God can send the rain, Baal must be discredited – decisively, publicly, clearly, in living color on a national level. God must go to extreme measures because sometimes, that's the only way to flush out the truth. After Baal is exposed as a hoax of a god, no rational person would still think that the rain comes from him. Thus, Elijah will propose a God contest!

"Who is the real God?" is the primary question of the **ch18 (21, 24, 36, 37, 39)** Yahweh will reveal Himself as the only real God and because of this we can make certain deductions about the character and nature of the real God.

**2-16** – Obadiah takes up a good bit of the writer's attention as he figures prominently in this section, in 2 different scenes: with Ahab (his boss) and with Elijah (fellow believer). The writer says Obadiah is the head administrator of Ahab's household and that he feared the Lord greatly. He

also shares with us some of the clandestine activities that Obadiah was engaged in – protecting and providing for 100 prophets. Here’s an interesting contrast between Ahab and Obadiah: one’s concerned with saving prophets while the other’s only concerned with saving livestock.

There’s no mention of Ahab showing any concern for trying to alleviate the misery of his own people; all he would have to do is turn back to the Lord. No, his only thought was for his horses and mules, his only care was to save some of them alive. What selfishness and complete disregard for the suffering of his people. He’s seeking grass when he should be seeking Yahweh! That’s not the case for Obadiah. In fact, as soon as the writer mentions Obi’s fear of the Lord than he shows that this “fear” was not just some private feeling or religious piety. His activity (4) is the fruit of his fear (3). He hides prophets at great hazard to himself. If it were exposed, he’d lose more than his top spot in the civil service.

Obadiah stands in contrast not just to Ahab but to Elijah as well. Our text (7-15) shows a clear distinction between the civil servant and the prophet. Elijah seems bold and confrontational while Obadiah appears cautious and fearful. Because of this, some commentators see him as a compromiser. Clearly, he’s afraid Ahab will execute him if he announces Elijah’s return; he mentions it 3 times (9, 12, 14). So, he prefers not to die; is that so strange? But, he’s not afraid to announce Elijah’s return; he’s just afraid that after he announces it, the Spirit of the Lord will spirit Elijah away and obi doesn’t want to be left holding the proverbial bag! That’s really what he was worried about.

The text seems to uphold a positive opinion of Obadiah and we should too. It took real guts and a lot of finagling to pull off such a large scale rescue mission. His secret work was a quiet monument to Jezebel’s failure. His courage thwarted the full success of her bloodlust against Yahweh’s prophets. Sometimes God attacks evil with an in-your-face style of an Elijah and sometimes He frustrates evil by the simple subversion of a secret agent. There are very few if any Elijah’s publicly opposing the evils of Communist China but there are literally hundreds of thousands of secret agents who are carrying the gospel to their families and neighbor, winning people to Christ every day.

That’s the first thing our text reveals about the real God – His service is so

diverse. Obadiah is clearly different from Elijah. Elijah's ministry is more public and confrontational; Obadiah works quietly behind the scenes and yet he's still faithful in the sphere God placed him in. The Bible never tells us that there is only one kind of faithful servant; it never commands us to be a clone of Elijah. In fact, it teaches the exact opposite (1 Cor 12:4-6). Models are helpful but forced imitation of them is foolish.

Faithfulness is not so dull that it only comes in one flavor. Besides, our own inherent pride requires the correction that this text gives us: we're not called to great works but to good works. We're not called to a flamboyant ministry but to a faithful ministry; we're not called to be dashing servant, only devoted servants. Elijah and Obadiah had completely different ministries but they were both faithful to do what Yahweh had called them to do. Both ministries were necessary; both were effective. The service of the real God is so diverse.

**17-21** – Ahab was easily the worst, most ungodly king that Israel ever had. Yet, he doesn't hesitate to blame the godly prophet Elijah for Israel's problems. According to his theology, it made sense for Ahab to blame Elijah. Ahab believed in Baal, so much so that his government promoted and supported Baal worship and persecuted Yahweh worshippers. Ahab believed Elijah had angered the sky-god Baal and thus, Baal withheld the rain. Ahab might have believed that Baal would continue to hold back the rain until Elijah was captured and executed. Instead of being arrested, Elijah challenges Ahab to a showdown on top of Mt. Carmel and surprisingly, Ahab readily agrees.

Now we're getting down to! Here we are atop Mt Carmel and Elijah has just thrown down the gauntlet to all of Israel. "How long will you go on limping between 2 opinions?" That's the pressing question: was Baal the real God or is Yahweh? This burning question ignites the entire episode but notice how Elijah presents Yahweh's demand: "If the Lord is God...follow (or go after) Him." This is not just some simple academic question. The format of Elijah's query assumes that theology leads to discipleship. Commitments have consequences. Elijah won't allow us to attend a God contest just so we can conclude that, "Okay, Yahweh's the real God. Now where do you want to eat lunch?" Knowing the real God does not allow us the comfort of such emotional detachment.

Elijah's point is clear is this: If Yahweh is God then follow Him. The existence of a real God is not simply a detached truth; it's a demanding reality! The God of the Bible refuses to be merely the topic of our theological bull sessions. He is not an idea that you play with, He's a King that you submit to and you need to know that from the very outset. This is no tame God; He comes barging in to your life, claiming it, invading it, refusing to allow you to confine Him to a religious box. We may prefer a more domesticated god, one that we can keep in check but that's not the real God. No, the real God comes with demands and His demands can be disturbing.

**22-39** – This entire Carmel contest serves to highlight the differences between Yahweh and Baal and since the overwhelming conclusion of this contest reveals that Baal is non-existent, all we need concern ourselves with is what's revealed about the nature of the real God and what we see is that the nature of the real God is so different.

1) Geography is no hindrance for Yahweh. Elijah may have specified Mt. Carmel for a reason. Some ancient, extra-biblical text indicates that Mt Carmel may well have been sacred ground for Baal worship and Elijah may have chosen it for that reason. If Carmel was Baal's turf, then Baal and his cohorts had the equivalent of what we would call home court advantage. If Yahweh whips Baal on his own turf, it would only serve to highlight the supremacy of Yahweh and magnify the impotence of Baal.

2) Numbers are of no consequence to Yahweh. If you've been keeping count, as far as representatives go, it was 450 to 1. Elijah tells them to go first in the God contest because they are many (**25**). If this contest were to happen today, all the press would talk about are Yahweh's plummeting approval ratings. But God's power has never depended on how many cheerleaders He has. This contest proved that popularity doesn't determine reality.

3) Activity doesn't impress or obligate Yahweh. The antics of Baal's prophets rate high on the scale of religious fervor. All morning long they carried on with their liturgical hoopla, crying out for Baal's intervention. At lunchtime, Elijah adds some sarcasm to their screams and encourages them to up the ante and go all out; "Crank it to 11" he tells them, "Maybe he's busy or napping." In paganism, gods and goddesses engaged in all

areas of human activity. Elijah uses this perspective to ridicule them with it. The pagan prophets take his advice and work themselves up into a greater frenzy of noisy racket and gushing blood.

But notice that all of that is absent in Elijah's prayer. It's not that he's not earnest in his request, he's just not frantic. He's not frantic because he doesn't need to be. Elijah's approach is simplicity itself: he prays and fire falls. Don't assume that Elijah was casual while the Baal boys were intense. Elijah was intense; he just knew Yahweh's nature. He knew he didn't have to badger, coerce or manipulate – didn't need to blabber of or bleed half the day for Yahweh to respond. A scorched altar and a smoking sacrifice testified to that.

4) Handicaps are no obstacle for Yahweh. In you think about it, Elijah was a more formidable opponent of Yahweh than Baal or his prophets were. A pagan brain might assume that Elijah was trying hard to ruin Yahweh's chance of success. He orders 4 jars full of water poured over the sacrifice and does this 3 times! Then he prays that Yahweh would consume his soggy mess. These Israelites weren't witless; everyone knows saturated wet stuff doesn't burn.

Elijah had stacked the deck against Yahweh so that, when His fire came there could be no explanation other than it was an "act of God." Maybe some recalled the pressing question in [Gen 18:14](#), Is anything too hard for the Lord? Theology explains Elijah's simplistic approach; because he knew the real God, he didn't need to mimic the antics and hype of the pagan prophets. What relief this truth brings into the life and ministry of all who serve the real God.

Another characteristic we see in the text is that the provision of the real God is so gracious ([30-38](#)). For the most part, the tone of ch18 is stern and rightly so. Israel's in pretty bad shape if God must stoop to the level of extreme miracle to break through her hard shell and extract a 1<sup>st</sup> commandment confession from her. Yet, for all the fire and smoke, there's a hint of mercy and glimmer of hope in the text. If Elijah is Yahweh's prosecutor, he's also Yahweh's evangelist. If this Carmel contest is Israel's rebuke, it's also her invitation.

When Elijah prays to Israel's covenant God (36a), Yahweh sends fire that burns up the offering as well as everything else. This sort of thing had

happened before. The first time was in [Lev 9:24](#). Aaron and his sons had been ordained as priests and Aaron had just given the benediction at the first tabernacle service when...burnt-offering, fire, people on their faces; just like in our text. [Lev 9](#) records the inauguration of tabernacle worship and the fire was proof that Yahweh accepted and validated the sacrificial system of worship He had prescribed.

A similar thing happened during the plague that attacked Israel and Jerusalem because of David's sin. When David sacrifice on the threshing floor of Ornan, the Bible says that David called on the Lord, and He answered him from heaven by fire on the alter of burnt offering ([I Chron 21:26](#)). David then declared that this very spot where Yahweh had authorized and accepted his sacrifice would be the location of the future temple. During Solomon's reign, when the temple was finally completed and dedicated, the Bible tells us again that fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices and the glory of the Lord filled the temple ([II Chron 7:1](#)).

Do you see the pattern here? Divine fire fell at the 2 most important moments in OT life, the inauguration of both the tabernacle and the temple worship. That fire was Yahweh's green light, indicating that He would accept this worship and that Israel should continue to approach Him in this way. What are the implications of this on our text? The fiery answer to Elijah's prayer shows that Yahweh has accepted Elijah's sacrifice.

Is this not Israel's hope? Does this not hint to Israel that there is a way back? How, they may ask? Through the means of grace and reconciliation that Yahweh has already provided: by way of the old, rugged altar. God is saying to Israel, "You have an altar, a place of atonement, where I will receive you!" If that's true then this Carmel contest proves not only that Yahweh is truly God but that He is also truly gracious. He is not only the real God but He's is also the reconciling God. Even amidst this harrowing confrontation, God is busy reconciling His rebellious people back to Himself. Thus, Yahweh's fire is both a terrifying proof and a subtle invitation.

Need I point out that there is an even better provision for reconciliation with God today? Whether we are boldly rebelling or foolishly wandering; the road to restoration leads straight to the altar at Calvary. The Lord never allows us to leave the cross or go beyond the cross; He only desires to take us more

deeply into the cross.

**40** – Finally, to the distain of many, we see that the severity of the real God is so condemning. The smoke clears and Israelites are on their faces confessing that Yahweh is the real God. Success! Let's go home. "Not so fast" says Elijah, "We have some unfinished business to attend to." This verse makes a lot of people uncomfortable; to them it's disappointing to follow the glory of Carmel with the gory of Kishon. This is yet another moral problem in the savage OT. Is that an accurate assessment? Is this just Elijah being vindictive? Is this just his fanatical tendency?

Not at all! What did this contest prove? That Yahweh was the real God. If Yahweh is the real God, that makes Baal a false god and all of Baal's prophets are exposed as false prophets. What verdict was applied to any person(s) who would lead Israel away from the worship of the one, true God: capital punishment; a death sentence. So, this Kishon slaughter is not an act of personal revenge; Elijah is simply carrying out the sanctions of Deut 13: those who woo Israel to worship another god forfeit their lives. Remember, Israel was a theocracy and Elijah is simply carrying out the provisions of Israel's constitution, Yahweh's covenant law related to the solicitation to apostasy.

The severity of the real God is condemning but it doesn't condemn God or Elijah, it condemns us if we look at v40 and don't get it. If we go into moral hysterics over v40 then there's a problem; not with Elijah or the OT but with us! We react this way because, unfortunately, apostasy isn't that big of a deal. We can't comprehend Yahweh's violence against rebellion in His people. But, here's the thing: God uses surgery on cancer when we expect Him to just use breath mints. The problem is not God's lack of refinement but our lack of sanctification. If our thinking were properly holy then we would readily understand verses like this. Our foolish response to the nasty business at Kishon testifies that we lack a proper view of the horror of sin

Elijah's challenge to Ahab was simply a request for the real God to stand up and declare Himself and He did! The real God stood up that day on Mt Carmel but the real God has also come down: He has come down to this earth; He has come down to our level and He calls us to come to Him for forgiveness, to believe in Him for salvation and to serve Him in faith. If you do, you will find Him the same as in ch18 – using different servants; making

disturbing demands; correcting your faulty thinking; lacing His severity with grace and exposing your lack of holiness. Does this sound intimidating? Imagine what life would be like without His work taking place in it and through it. 😊